Walleye limit change to provide anglers an opportunity to catch fish that will be lost

Pierre Capital Journal

Officials from the state Department of Game, Fish and Parks want to make sure the public know why the limits for catching walleye on Lake Oahe might change this year.

"It's simple; it's not to fix the fishery," said Mark Fincel, a senior fish biologist with the department.

Fincel and Geno Adams, the department's fisheries program manager, speaking Tuesday night at a meeting of the Central South Dakota chapter of Walleyes Unlimited in Fort Pierre, said the rule changes are more about providing anglers the opportunity to catch fish that might otherwise die.

The gathering was the latest in a string of meetings across the state discussing the rationale behind the proposed changes before they are presented for public discussion at a Nov. 1 commission meeting in Madison.

The regulations come in response to an unusually high number of 10- to 15-inch fish, the overall poor condition of Oahe's walleye and a lack of prey fish after last year's flood swept a large portion of rainbow smelt downstream.

The proposed limits for 2013 would allow eight walleyes per day, four of which could be 15 inches or longer, and a possession limit of 24 walleyes. It would also remove the current one-fish-over-20-inches rule.

Adams said that last point has caused the most debate, with most of the public feedback saying they agree with the rest of the changes, except for that one. There has been a lot of expressed concern about depleting the large trophy fish or depleting the population, he said.

But Adams said people need to think about fish like insects – in good conditions there will be a lot and in bad conditions there will be less. The amount of fishing has almost not effect.

"There are very few examples in the entire U.S. where fish populations have been fished down to the point where they can't spawn," he said.

He also said the new regulations, if passed, would be reviewed and possibly returned to normal next year, depending on conditions in the lake.

Fincel said the one-over-twenty was more a social convention, in place because anglers didn't like showing up to cleaning stations with a few 15-inch fish and standing next to others with several 20-plus inch fish.

He also pointed to North Dakota, which does not have a similar rule, but there is no large-scale harvest of larger fish. In fact, studies show that these limits only save a few thousand fish out of lakes where 4 million walleye were caught and 600,000 harvested this year.

"Biologically, (it's) not going to make a difference," he said.

However, the overall condition of larger fish in the lake has declined – Fincel said they are "pretty much the bottom of the barrel" compared to other North American walleye — and there may be a mortality rate close to 2001, when similar conditions caused a 80 percent die off. These proposed changes mean if someone catches a 22-inch and 24-inch fish, there is no good reason to throw one back, he said.

"I want to give people the opportunity to harvest a fish if they can," Fincel said.

Corps Set To Discuss River Plan Next Week In Sioux City

Amidst one of the worst drought years in history, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will host a series of meetings next week on its draft Annual Operating Plan (AOP) for the Missouri River basin.

The Sioux City meeting will be held at 11 a.m. Wednesday at the Stoney Creek Inn & Conference Center, 300 Third Street.

Other meetings next week include Fort Peck, Mont., on Monday; Pierre and Bismarck, No. Dak., on Tuesday; and St. Joseph, Mo., and Columbia, Mo., on Thursday.

The circumstances surrounding the upcoming public meetings represent a dramatic turnaround from last year, when record releases created historic Missouri River flooding.

For that reason, the public holds a special stake in attending the upcoming meetings, said Jody Farhat, chief of water management for the Missouri River Basin.

“With basin conditions remaining dry and a fall forecast of continuing warmer, drier conditions, we encourage stakeholders to attend these meetings,” she said in a news release. “We can answer their questions about our planned operation scenarios and any potential conservation measures that may be necessary in 2013, as well as what those impacts might mean to them.”

The public meeting will include a presentation from the Corps regarding 2012 operations. Corps officials will also outline plans for operating the reservoir system in 2013. The presentations will be followed by a question-and-answer session.

Comments on the draft plan will be taken during the meetings.

The public and stakeholders can also speak directly with Corps officials during the hour preceding and following the meeting.

The 2012-2013 Draft Annual Operating Plan anticipates low, relatively stable runoff into the basin for the remainder of the 2012 calendar year and into early spring 2013, according to the news release. As a result, the Corps expects system storage to fall below the base of the annual flood control pool when the 2013 runoff season begins on or around March 1.

The flood control pool is the desired operating zone for the system, according to Corps officials. By remaining in the flood control pool, the Corps can provide good service to all eight of its congressionally authorized purposes — water quality control, irrigation, navigation, water supply, flood control, fish and wildlife, hydropower and recreation.

“Drought conservation measures will be implemented beginning this winter with Gavins Point releases at minimum levels,” Farhat said.

From December through the end of February, releases will be targeted at 12,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) to conserve water in the reservoir system.

Temporary increases above 12,000 cfs will be provided during periods of ice formation to keep water intakes along the lower river operational. When the reservoir system is full, Gavins Point winter releases are generally scheduled near 17,000 cfs, or higher if flood water is being evacuated.

The current forecast for spring 2013 indicates that system storage at the start of the runoff season will be about 8 million acre-feet (maf) below the base of the flood control and multiple use zone, according to the news release. If the forecast materializes, additional water conservation measures outlined in the Master Manual will be implemented.

“Most likely, we will begin the 2013 navigation season with reduced navigation flow support,” Farhat said. “The upper three reservoirs may also be drawn down as much as 10 feet below the desired level, potentially impact other purposes such as recreation.”

“We will have a better picture of necessary measures to take by the start of the 2013 runoff season, which begins on or about March 1,” she added.

Despite the drought, hydropower generation remains on target, according to a Corps release.

Sheep prices bottom out

KOTA-TV Rapid City

The drop in sheep prices this year has been so extreme that 8 U.S. Senators are demanding an investigation into market anomalies. Part of the problem is the drought but Jack Orwick, a sheep producer from Hoover says it's been a perfect storm of bad things this year, of drought, predators, and a drastic decrease in the price per pound.

Max Mathews, President of the South Dakota Sheep Growers Association says it may cause some producers to shut down altogether.

Matthews says another way to help stabilize their industry - set a fair market value on domestic lamb, based on the percentage of sales.

Then predators are a growing problem. Steve Clements, a sheep producer from Phillip says you can't shoot enough of them to keep them thinned out.

Clements blames the problem on changes made within the South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks Department.

Mike Kintigh with the Game Fish and Parks Department says those cut backs were made because the federal government cut back a significant portion of the funding to the ADC, or Animal Damage Control Program.

But Clements says that trappers need to be back trapping 100-percent of the time.

Congresswoman Kristi Noem, who met with producers as a part of her campaign schedule said that she's making an effort to give a level playing field to producers in the state.

Her challenger Matt Varilek said in a release that sheep growers deserve an aggressive advocate for the GIPSA rule and the packer ban, which would give small farmers and ranchers support that's lacking today.

A WHOLE NEW HABITAT: Missouri River flooding creates new fish habitat

Sioux City Journal

ONAWA, Iowa | D.J. Vogler wasn't sure what he was going to find as he eased his aluminum boat up to a net set off the edge of the Missouri River near Onawa.

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources fisheries biologist and his three-person volunteer crew were exploring new territory: A 100-by-50-yard hole carved deep into the riverbank and river bottom during last year's flood.

Last week, Vogler and his crew began netting these new off-current areas to determine how fish are utilizing the new habitat. Information from the samplings will be used when state and federal agencies determine what kind of fish habitat to build on public lands.

Formed by floodwaters exploiting weak spots in the bank, the erosion created a pool of slow, deep water sheltered from the swift current of the main channel. This off-current water provides a respite for fish out of the current, which can run as fast as 12 mph, Vogler said.

"The current on the river is moving really fast in most stretches, so those areas that are deep and don't have any current are few and far between," Vogler said.

An altered landscape

The Missouri River wasn't always the fast, relatively straight shot from Omaha to Sioux City that it is today. Thirty-one miles of the river have been removed between the two cities since 1890, turning a meandering river into the channel it is today. Seventy-five miles of river were eliminated from Sioux City to where the river empties into the Mississippi River in St. Louis.

The effort, done by the Army Corps of Engineers, was driven by a desire to make navigating the river easier.

Today, the Corps prevents erosion of river banks by lining sections of shoreline with rock. It also maintains wing dikes -- rocky barriers that stretch from the river bank out into the water, which divert current from the banks out into the channel.

The force of last year's flood was so powerful that the Missouri overcame the manmade flood-control barriers meant to contain it.

The result was devastating for riverfront property owners, but good for the fish.

The same floodwaters that saturated homes and businesses eroded large chunks of shoreline. More fish habitat was formed when saturated river banks gave way, pulling trees into the river as they fell.

Out in the flood plain, slower water that saturated the surrounding land for months served as natural hatcheries for young fish. The result was a very exciting year for area fisherman in 2012.

"I had the best year ever (this year) on the Missouri that I've ever had," said Bobby Walrod, founder of the Big Sioux River Cats catfishing club. "I caught more fish. I caught bigger fish."

A new fishing hole

On Oct. 15, Vogler and his crew -- 185th Air Refueling Wing Air National Guard volunteers Justin Menard, Matt Wulf and Lance Larson -- found a variety of fish in the new deepwater area near Onawa. The net strung across the 12-to 23-foot-deep hole contained two paddlefish, a small catfish, a freshwater drum, a smattering of big and small-mouth buffalo fish and a few carp.

Later that week, the team netted near Blencoe, Iowa; Blair, Nebraska; and the DeSoto Bend National Wildlife Refuge.

Over the next few weeks, they'll check sites down by the Missouri-Iowa border.

So far, the nettings produced more paddlefish -- which Vogler said seemed to be doing particularly well this year -- as well as channel catfish, northern pike and shovel-nose sturgeon.

The catches haven't netted enough information for Vogler to have any theories about how the new habitat fits into the river's ecosystem.

Data from the catches will be analyzed over the winter. However, he says it's clear that fish are using the new underwater landscape.

"Just by looking just at what I've collected so far, a lot of the species that we expect or know are doing well in the river, they're using these habitats," he said.

How long fish will be able to use this new slow, deep water is another question.

The Army Corps of Engineers has awarded $145 million to repair wing dikes, levees, rock revetments along the shoreline and other structures along the river. And the river is also always changing, carving out one place and dumping sand in another.

"We've heard some feedback from the corps that some of these sites might only last a year or two, or they might last 10 years," Vogler said. "I don't think anybody can say for certain."

Humane Society president on Nevada wildlife board

CARSON CITY, Nev. (AP) — An animal advocate has been named to the Nevada Wildlife Commission — the first such appointment in recent memory to a board that has come under fire by critics who say it's unfairly stacked with hunters.

Karen Summers Layne is president of the Las Vegas Valley Humane Society. She was appointed to the nine-member policy board by Gov. Brian Sandoval on Oct. 3. Her appointment follows that of former Clark County Sheriff Bill Young in July.

"It's going to be an interesting position," Layne told The Associated Press.

Layne, 65, spoke against hunting black bears when the commission held hearings on instituting Nevada's inaugural bear season in 2010. The hunting season was ultimately approved and continues.

"I'm not a fan of bear hunting. That's not going to be a surprise to anybody," she said.

She also has worked on trapping regulations for the Mount Charleston region outside Las Vegas, an effort she said helped forge a working relationship with other members of the commission.

Commission Chairman Jack Robb said Layne and Young "bring a breadth of experience and knowledge" to the board.

"The wildlife issues we face today are not like those faced by our predecessors," Robb said. "The commission needs a diversity of perspectives to help address the unique and complex wildlife issues in Nevada."

But the news didn't go over well with some hunters.

Andrew Williams, 49, a sportsman from Fernley, said an animal advocate has no place on the commission that sets policy on how elk, mule deer and other big game species are managed — a task that includes setting annual quotas on how many tags are issued to hunters who want to kill them for meat or trophy antlers.

"Putting someone like that on the board is just a slap in the face to people who hunt and fish in this state," he said.

As a public representative on the commission, Layne said she hopes her involvement will bring greater awareness of public opinion when it comes to managing wildlife.

"I think you always have to temper what you want to do given the long history of the commission," she said. "I think the fact that the governor put me on the commission says a lot."

Trish Swain, founder of TrailSafe Nevada, a group seeking tougher trapping regulations, hailed Layne's appointment as "absolutely groundbreaking," but added the commission's newest member won't bring an immediate shift in wildlife management.

"I can't image how one new person will change the nature of the board," she said.

Kathryn Bricker, executive director of NoBearHuntNV, a group formed to oppose bear hunting, agreed.

"This is a token gesture but is one that is appreciated," Bricker said "There's going to be a lot of 8-1 votes." she said.

Dennis Wilson, president of Nevada Bighorns Unlimited, conceded that Layne's appointment has caused a lot of angst among sportsmen.

"There are a number of members who are not happy," he said.

But Wilson said he knows Layne and spoke with her Wednesday.

"I know her and respect her," he said. "She is intelligent, passionate and professional. She is willing to listen, to carefully consider every angle.

"We are not going to always agree," Wilson said. "But our goal ... is to keep an open and communicative relationship with her so we can work together for the betterment of Nevada's wildlife."

Layne holds a doctorate degree in public administration, and is retired both from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and the Las Vegas Police Department, where she worked as planning director.

She becomes only the sixth woman to serve on the commission.

During an interim legislative subcommittee hearing earlier this, critics argued for the dissolution of the commission or the restructuring of the Department of Wildlife — the agency that implements wildlife management — to give "non-consumptive" animal lovers a greater say on wildlife issues.

"Our wildlife is a treasure," Swain said during a March hearing. "Today's tourist wants their wildlife alive."

Department of Wildlife officials and sportsmen groups said federal money along with fees paid by sportsmen fund most of the agency's budget. Groups such as Nevada Bighorns Unlimited and others also contribute big dollars for conservation efforts.

But some lawmakers said that doesn't mean hunters should dictate wildlife management.

Assemblywoman Maggie Carlton, D-Las Vegas, at the time said it was a "cultural problem" that hunters and trappers feel the agency's job to protect their interests.

Carlton said Tuesday that she welcomed Layne's appointment.

"I'm glad the governor has picked her and she will bring a good voice and work hard on the issues," she said.

Nebraska voters consider four ballot measures

OMAHA (AP) — Nebraskans will decide whether to enshrine hunting and fishing in the state constitution, let lawmakers serve longer and earn more money, and whether to make it a little easier to impeach officials.

With little campaigning being done on any of the measures on the Nov. 6 ballot, it's unclear how any of them will fare. All were referred to voters by the Legislature.

Nebraska is one of four states — along with Idaho, Kentucky, and Wyoming — to consider creating a constitutional right to hunt and fish this November. The National Conference of State Legislatures says 13 states already have similar protections. Seven other states considered similar legislation this year but failed to pass anything.

Scott Smathers, executive director of the Nebraska Sportsmen's Foundation, said it's important to protect the sports now before animal rights groups, such as the Humane Society of the United States, can act. Smathers said he believes it's important to put this statement in the state constitution to make clear how Nebraskans feel about hunting and fishing.

"It's a statement that says, 'Listen, we value these traditions in our state,'" said Smathers, whose group has been holding meetings to explain the need for the ballot measure.

Critics of the proposal question whether language should be added to the constitution when there's no apparent threat to hunting and fishing in Nebraska. But hunting rights advocates point to measures animal-welfare groups pushed in other states, including a ban on dove hunting approved by Michigan voters in 2006 and a five-year ban on bear hunting in New Jersey that ended in 2010.

"We know that those groups are coming, and their efforts are increasing," Smathers said.

The Humane Society of the United States, which has led efforts to improve conditions for farm animals, isn't campaigning against the Nebraska measure, said Jocelyn Nickerson, the group's state director. Nickerson said there is no threat to hunting and fishing in Nebraska.

"This amendment is a solution in search of a problem," she said.

Randy Adkins, a political science professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, said he expects the hunting measure to pass easily because hunting is so popular in the state and some people are concerned about the possibility of new gun-ownership restrictions.

Nebraska ballot measures must receive a simple majority of yes votes to pass. But the number of yes votes a measure receives must be greater than 35 percent of the total votes cast in the election.

Idaho to vote on constitutional right to hunt, fish — and trap

BOISE — Idaho has a measure on the November ballot to enshrine a right to hunt, fish and trap in the state constitution — a proposal that likely would generate virtually no opposition in the outdoorsy state but for the inclusion of trapping.

Thirteen other states have passed right-to-hunt-and-fish amendments, all but one of them in the past 15 years. Three others in addition to Idaho — Kentucky, Nebraska and Wyoming — are considering them in November. But only five states have specifically protected the right to trap.

Greg Moore, head of Idahoans Against Trapping, called trapping "an inherently unethical way to kill animals" and a hazard to pets. "Trapping is just no longer necessary — we don't need the fur," he said. "It's so women in places like Sun Valley who think they're chic can have fur trim on their ski parkas. That's not worth all the suffering that goes into it."

His group has raised $22,000 for a campaign against the constitutional amendment, HJR2aa, and hopes to start running a TV commercial against it in the Boise area. The money came from dozens of Idaho residents, campaign-finance reports show, along with $5,000 from a family foundation and $1,000 from the Idaho Sierra Club.

Patrick Carney, president of the Idaho Trappers Association, said opponents are misinformed. "I do not believe that it's inhumane," he said. "We've come a long ways over the last probably 40 years with the kinds of traps."

His group is preparing radio ads and billboards in favor of the amendment. He said of the measure's opponents, "They're against everything. They want us to eat bean sprouts and tofu, I guess."

Sen. Lee Heider, R-Twin Falls, author of the Idaho amendment, said he wants to preserve the state's heritage of hunting, fishing and trapping for future generations. "It needs to be preserved in our constitution so that it can't be challenged every year by some other faction," Heider said.

Trapping is a much smaller portion of Idaho's wildlife scene than hunting and fishing; the state licensed 1,752 trappers last year but sold more than half a million licenses for hunting or fishing.

State Fish and Game records show more than 800 nontargeted animals got caught in traps over the past two years, including 102 rabbits, 62 squirrels, 49 skunks, 44 mountain lions, 37 porcupines, 35 deer, 30 dogs, 24 house cats and two eagles. Not all were killed or injured; where possible, they were released unharmed.

Craig White, a wildlife biologist with Idaho Fish and Game, noted that interest in trapping in Idaho fluctuates with the economy and with the price of a bobcat pelt, which now is high, averaging $300 to $500. Idaho had about 1,000 licensed trappers until two years ago, when the number started climbing to the current 1,700-plus.

The amendment has aroused some concern among constitutional scholars for recognizing something other than a traditional "fundamental right" like freedom of speech or religion. David Adler, constitutional expert and head of the Andrus Center for Public Policy at Boise State University, likened it to amending a constitution to add a right to smoke or a right to ride a bicycle.

"We wouldn't clutter up the constitution with those kinds of interests," he said.

Adler said, "Hunting and fishing rights would not ever be threatened in Idaho — it's in Idahoans' DNA. The practice of trapping might be a different issue. But that's why it's all the more important to deal with that at a legislative level, because legislators can take account of society's views and values on that kind of an activity."

Creating a new constitutional right could invite lawsuits over whether various hunting, fishing or trapping regulations go too far, Adler warned. Lawmakers cited that concern, among others, in rejecting the first five versions of Heider's amendment this year before finally backing the sixth.

Iowa pheasant numbers grow

This year’s drought has hurt the area corn crops and put stress on cattle, but the pheasant hunting season is not expected to decline.

Iowa’s season starts Saturday, Oct. 27, and lasts through Jan. 10.

According to Pheasants Forever, the national organization that promotes the bird and sport, after five years of bad winters and soggy springs, Iowa’s pheasant population is increasing, with the state’s August roadside survey increasing 16 percent from last year.

Todd Bogenschutz, Upland Wildlife Research Biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, says the increase may be even bigger, as heavy dews, which produce the best counting conditions, occurred less often because of the drought.

Dave Tackett, treasurer of the Page County Pheasants Forever, agreed,

"I think you will find in Page County that we still have good numbers," he said. "I'm being cautiously optimistic, but I think it will be better than last year."

Tackett said the dry spring weather should have made it ideal for the young hatchlings to get started.

"And we still have water in creeks and streams," he said.

According to Pheasants Forever, pheasant counts trended higher in seven of Iowa's nine survey regions, only declining in the southwest and west central regions (regions also home to some of the worst dew conditions for counting).

Iowa's overall harvest this year is expected to be around 200,000 roosters.

"While pheasant counts remain well below what the wildlife bureau and most hunters would like to see in Iowa – rest assured as long as Iowa has well-managed CRP habitat, the populations will bounce back. Iowa currently has 1.6 million acres of CRP and this level of habitat should support a 600,000-800,000 rooster harvest with 2-3 more years of good weather," Bogenschutz says.

Phesasant habitat, including CRP, is the biggest challenge for pheasant populations in Page County, said Tackett.

"The biggest enemy is the changing landscape. We have lost treelines, fence rows and CRP land, which can pull bird numbers down," he said. Birds typically roost and breed in those areas.

But the increase in farmland prices and grain prices have influenced landowners to convert those areas to crop production which disturb the birds.

"When land prices go up and grain prices are high, it's hard to re-enroll in CRP," Hackett said.

Pheasants Forever recently announced a new partnership with the Iowa DNR in which the state's 105 Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever chapters will work with DNR biologists and landowners to create habitat necessary on public and private acres to increase population rebounds during times of ideal weather conditions and mitigate significant population declines during times of habitat loss and severe weather conditions.

Iowa pheasant hunters have a daily bag limit of three and possession limit of 12.

In other Iowa hunting news, the Iowa DNR has identified more than 100 wildlife management areas across Iowa that qualify for habitat management by a Pheasants Forever or Quail Forever chapter. Iowa's bobwhite quail numbers increased 63 percent over 2011. Bobwhite quail hunting season also starts Oct. 27.

Recipe Week: VENISON

Two Hearts
A deer hunter values the most fundamental reason to hunt—the harvest of food.
by Michael Furtman, Minnesota Conservationist Magazine

One beats slowly, its owner picking his way along the base of a high ridge, nose testing the breeze for danger or the scent of a doe ready to mate. It is a November morning, and the sun has only just now cleared the ridge, its faint rays falling simultaneously on each heart's owner.

The other heart—mine—beats rapidly, pounding in my chest while I try to move quietly as the buck ambles toward me. The days of waiting have been long and often cold, as it is this morning. With stiffness born of that cold, I bring the rifle slowly to my shoulder. My eyes strain through the sights to find the other's heart. A finger squeezes. Only one heart remains beating.

Each autumn this scene is repeated thousands of times in Minnesota. Men and women, boys and girls, don their hunting clothing, uncase rifle or bow, and sit and wait, or creep quietly, for a chance to kill a deer. I have been a part of that tradition since I was a young man. At first, I hunted deer simply because my dad did. In time I hunted deer for myself, for reasons that I believe are inherently human.

I do not pretend to know why all hunters venture into the woods. But I suspect most hunters are responding to something genuinely primordial, something so fundamentally a part of the human DNA that many of us cannot deny it, nor do we want to. And while I've

been thrilled to take many large bucks over the years, my motivation to hunt deer is little different than that of hunters through the ages—to put meat on the table.

A recent study by Lund University in Sweden confirmed what I have long believed: Humans are a carnivorous species. The researchers defined a carnivore as a mammal that obtains at least 20 percent of its energy from meat. When they studied nearly six dozen species, they found that humans clearly fit into this category. They found the most telling trait we share with other carnivores was that of early weaning. While our species' breastfeeding period, about two years, is far longer than that of a wolf or a lion, it is roughly one-third the length of those of our nearest biological relatives, the great apes. Carnivores wean sooner than herbivores or omnivores because their nutrient-rich diet produces better milk.

Of the 200,000 years that our species has been on this planet, humans have practiced agriculture only for the last 10,000 years, and in many regions, far less time than that. When ancient humans began eating meat, the new, higher-quality diet meant women could give birth more often during their reproductive life, which in turn meant we could spread more rapidly across the world. In addition, learning to hunt necessitated improved communication, planning, and the development of tools, all of which demanded larger brains. And eating meat made that increase in brain size possible.

Hunting also shaped our bodies. Although it may be hard to fathom considering today's obesity epidemic, the human body evolved to be long and lean. Unlike other animals, we evolved sweat glands over nearly our entire body. These traits meant we could be persistent in pursuit of prey, most of which could not cool themselves and thus would tire more quickly. We actually grew shorter in stature after the advent of agriculture.

We all owe our big brain, our skill as communicators, even our very body shape to our early ancestors' choice to become meat eaters. To say that hunting was instrumental to our rise as a species is an understatement, for it was more than just a way to eat. Hunting made us human.

For many people today, that urge to hunt is deeply buried. For many others, it is still as near to the surface as a good belly laugh.

Sunlight streams in dappled patterns through the aspen leaves, filtering to the forest floor where asters sip it up. A clear creek courses east through the woods, bending its way around ancient esker ridges until it finally turns north and spills into the brawling St. Louis River.

White-tailed deer bed just below the ridge tops, high vantage points from which they can watch for wolves or other dangers. Here they chew their cud of regurgitated asters and greens, and they can slip quietly down to the creek for a refreshing drink.

Over long years I have learned their ways, walked their trails, noted where bucks make scrapes in the same locations every year, leaving generations of whitetail DNA soaked into the soil as they urinate to make their presence known. With luck, one of these deer will, come November, become my family's food.

There is not a deer I have killed that I haven't momentarily mourned. Long ago I decided that if I were going to eat meat, it would be meat that I killed, meat free of drugs and from an animal that had ranged free and enjoyed the warmth of a rising sun. Its flesh would store the sun and the asters and the clear, clean waters of the creek, and by eating it, I would absorb the essence of that place.

Despite my brief sorrow at taking this life, I find immense satisfaction in seeing those rows of tightly wrapped packages of venison in our freezer. Chops. Steaks. Hamburger. All have been butchered carefully on the kitchen table, with no scrap unused. The meat that is unfit for us goes into the dog's dish. The thick fat from the haunches is trimmed away and skewered outside for chickadees and woodpeckers. The hide is cleaned and rolled and sold or donated to be turned into gloves and mittens and other useful things. And all these uses, all these good things, come at little environmental cost to the planet.

There are other reasons people hunt. For many it is a communal experience, time to be with family or friends, which also may hark back to an earlier tribal instinct. Still others seek bucks with exceptionally large antlers, which I also believe is ancient instinct, since the bigger the antlers, the bigger the body, and early hunters surely would have chosen animals that provided the greatest amount of food. Regardless of the reason they hunt deer, studies show, 95 percent of hunters eat, or their family eats, the animal that they kill.

Although a smaller percentage of people hunt today than did just a generation ago, there are encouraging trends. Women are increasingly joining the ranks, and when they are polled and asked why they hunt, nearly half say it is to provide food. Blogs and books are popularizing hunting among another perhaps unlikely group—largely urban, environmentally conscious younger people who have decided they too want to know the source of their food. Some of these authors give workshops in large cities on how to become a hunter.

I am not, of course, thinking of any of this as I hunt. I am, for that time, as alive as I ever am, my grossly undermatched senses as tuned as they can be, my mind as focused as I can make it. If luck smiles, if I have done everything right, a deer and I will cross paths. I will, despite every urging of my tense body, take my time to make a clean shot, to make a nearly instant kill. And when I kneel beside the deer's still body, I will do as I always do—thank it for its life.

To hunt well is to become a part of the land. To hunt well is to eat of the earth in a manner that honors the source of your food.

In those moments when I kneel over the prostrate deer, I am, for a little while, just one more human hunter in an unbroken line that stretches back millions of years, swept along in the current that begins with birth and ends with death.

And I am aware that among all the carnivores, we alone know this.

Mediterranean Venison Steak Pita Sandwiches (serves 4)

Even family and friends who say they don't like venison ask for seconds when it is prepared using this simple and delicious recipe. The dish is also great with wild duck. The quality of your ingredients counts. The better the olive oil, olives, feta, basil, and oregano, the more raves you'll get. But don't be tempted to use fresh garlic; you'll end up with a pasty mess. The seasoning needs to be dry to press into the surface of the steaks.

- 2 venison steaks, cut 1-inch thick (about 1 ½ pounds)
- 1 ½ teaspoons dried basil
- 1 ½ teaspoons garlic powder
- 1 ½ teaspoons dried oregano leaves ½ teaspoon salt
- pinch of finely ground black pepper
- 1 to 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 to 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice, or
half a medium-size lemon
- 4 pitas, warmed
- Crumbled feta cheese
- Chopped Kalamata or ripe olives

Make sure the venison is well-trimmed—no bone, no silver skin, no fat. Combine seasoning ingredients in a bowl and press firmly into the steaks so seasoning does not fall off when steaks are handled. Heat oil in large cast-iron or nonstick skillet over medium heat. Place steaks in skillet and cook to medium rare, 4 to 5 minutes per side, turning them over when seasoning on pan side is nearly crusted. Steaks are done when center is reddish-pink; do not overcook. While steaks are still sizzling in skillet, pour or squeeze lemon juice over them. Place steaks on cutting board and slice into strips. Arrange a portion of venison steak on each pita, then add desired amount of feta and olives.